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Then There Was the Disinformation

Three years ago, an active campaign of disinformation—using forged intelligence documents and operatives inside the government—was conducted to deceive journalists and to embarrass President Carter.

There is no evidence that such activities were instigated or condoned by anyone in the Reagan campaign. But the fact that they are known to have occurred is all the more reason for the Justice Department and the Congress to get on with the job of investigating the many curious occurrences of the 1980 campaign.

Although careful reporters were able to spot and largely to foil two of the disinformation efforts, a third was a spectacular success, resulting in a series of columns by Jack Anderson that appeared in hundreds of newspapers around the country.

In August 1980, Anderson says, he was presented with documents showing that President Carter had ordered an invasion of Iran to take place in mid-October. This "tentative invasion date" also was confirmed, according to Anderson, by someone working with the National Security Council in the Carter White House. According to the columnist, his NSC source also said that the reason for the president's order was "to save himself from almost certain defeat in November." From Aug. 18 through Aug. 22, Anderson wrote and distributed five columns based on this information.

In fact, no such orders ever were issued and the idea of launching a second rescue mission never was seriously considered or discussed. Although a contingency plan was prepared as a matter of course, conditions never arose that were even remotely consistent with its use.

If, as Anderson claims, he has documents showing that such orders were issued, those documents were forgeries. If someone on the NSC staff confirmed the authenticity of these documents, much less described the president's motives for the nonexistent orders, he was lying.

As the first Anderson columns about the politically inspired invasion orders were appearing, Washington Post defense correspondent George Wilson became the target for the second disinformation effort. Wilson

was contacted by an anonymous source who claimed to work for the CIA. For several weeks, this source tried to sell Wilson a variety of stories, all damaging to the Carter administration. One described a CIA study, supposedly done in connection with the April attempt to rescue the hostages, that had predicted the effort would result in 60 percent casualties among the hostages.

Wilson was interested but insisted that he needed something more substantial before he could write such a story. In mid-September, he received through the mail what appeared to be the "something more" he had requested: a copy of a CIA study, dated March 16, 1980, entitled "OPLAN EAGLE CLAW Loss Estimate." The document stated that 20 percent of the hostages would be killed or seriously wounded during the assault on the embassy compound, another 25 percent during the effort to locate and identify the hostages and another 15 percent during their evacuation to the waiting helicopters.

That document was a forgery. In the words of former Deputy CIA Director Frank Carlucci, the man who supposedly ordered the study, "I have been unable to find anything in this alleged CIA document that is either accurate or which approximates any memorandum we prepared."

Wilson was convinced by Carlucci's analysis, which listed a series of specific flaws and errors in the document, and wrote no story.

The third and by far the most vicious portion of the disinformation campaign was launched on Capitol Hill in early September. Allegations were spread by Republican Senate staffers that David Aaron, deputy to National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, had been responsible for the arrest and execution of a valuable American spy in the Soviet Union. The charges were proven to be false, but not until after the election. In the meantime, the staffers succeeded in provoking a full-scale investigation by the Senate Intelligence Committee and in leaking word of the supposedly secret investigation, along with Aaron's name, to several news organizations, including The New York Times.

On Sept. 23, the Times, convinced that journalists were being used, blew the whistle on the smear campaign. A week later, Cable News Network senior correspondent Daniel Schorr, writing in The New Republic, concluded an in-depth analysis of the affair by describing the attack on Aaron as "a classic piece of covert action [that] left the desired taint of suspicion."

Spreading the Aaron smear were members of the Madison group, established, according to columnist William Safire, to "embarrass, bedevil, and defeat" the Carter administration. The group of ultraconservative Senate staff members maintained a liaison with the Reagan campaign.

Whether the mole (or moles) in the Carter administration who allegedly provided national security documents to the Reagan campaign also were guilty of providing malicious and false information to the press will not be known, of course, until all those involved are identified and questioned under oath.

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